

Figure 1 Barnaba da Modena, *Ascension*, 1377

Halos in Medieval and Renaissance Italian Art

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“In view of the importance of the halo in art and considering the extensiveness of its use, it is curious to find so little agreement of opinion as to its origin and meaning, since it has been variously described as a symbol of the fire-worshippers of the East, as a decorative device, as a diadem, as a visible sign of the light and glory of God, as a protection from bird-droppings, as the disc of the sun and as the hwareno of the Persian.” - E. H. Ramsden

As Ramsden stated above in 1941 when he wrote for the *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, the origin of halos has been mostly undecided. In my research on the topic, I argued that as a symbol or icon, halos are directly related to natural-occurring halos we witness in the skies. Empirically, halos are not distinctly tied to one religious faction or another. They appear all over the world and have been around for many centuries.

At first my curiosity about halos came from how awkwardly they were included in art during the Medieval and Renaissance periods. They at times occlude the faces behind them, hover flatly above or slice directly through heads. One can only imagine the clanging noises halos made when all saints turned their heads at once. Regardless of their clumsy inclusion and sometimes awkward profiles, they remained an important ingredient in sacred paintings. My dissertation titled “A Closer Look at Halos in Medieval and Renaissance Italian Art” explored the function of halos as a symbol that carried far more individual identity to the person wearing it than what we today might understand.



Figure 2 Sandro Botticelli, *Detail of Bardi Madonna with Saints*, 1485, Berlin with pleaching

As it turned out, research revealed to me that it was mostly in Italy that halos were so diversified. Typically, halos are round and are either presented as a solid plate, a ring of light or a crown. Sometimes facsimiles of halos appear composed of vegetation, fabrics or architecture. When vegetation is woven together it's called *pleaching*.

In Italy, artists evolved from the dictated codes given by the church's scholars and clerics for how a halo should appear and bloomed eventually into the personal styles that today help us properly identify the artist and the date of the art. Halos also held symbols within them to identify the virtues of the person standing beneath. Extra filigree and tracery introduced by prominent Sieneese and Florentine artists allowed them to brandish their personal mark by using specific tools to pound texture into gold. In short, there is a world of information given to us in the shapes and styles of halos that I'd like to reveal. Additionally, I'll give examples of how natural halos have been the prototype for halos in art, specifically in Italian Medieval and Renaissance art.

Let's look at the significance of the halo. It designates the wearer as someone who is an exemplar of a religious or leadership position. The halo assigns a paragon of masterfulness in character and is a great distinction; they are only worn by civic leaders, religious martyrs, or the divine, and sometimes by successful warriors. Because the halo adorns the head they can be compared to the distinction of a crown or a wreath of laurel. Indeed, there is a great resemblance between halos and crowns in both appearance and purpose. Both have existed in history for several centuries and both are worn on the head giving that part of our bodies more significance. They're an important part of a uniform's insignia which alerts the viewers of the stature of the person being portrayed.



Figure 3 Domenico di Michelino, *Dante's Commedia*, 1465

“Originally the sun and the moon were seen to be equipped with ‘natural’ halos. Subsequently, the pattern was bequeathed to sun gods, to moon goddesses, and to other sacred personages. In this manner, the halo acquired a sacred connotation.” - Donald L. Cyr

Certainly, halos depict something out of our earthly existence, something sublime and ethereal. When we look to the skies, we may see halos surrounding the sun or the moon. We observe rainbows in a similar situation. It's a simple recipe of adding a source of light to a six-sided ice crystal. What reflects off becomes a magnificent nebula of light and color. The most common halo is called the 22 degree halo which appears as a basic circle surrounding a light source. However, there are many different halos based both upon the circular shape as well as pillars. Pillar halos need a very cold atmosphere to

form from the light of the sun or the moon. Coincidentally, or not, pillar saints are found in icon paintings. These were saints who spent many days and nights sitting on top of a pillar in early Christianity, espousing the religion's dogma to those below. Early Christian art shows examples of saints being tended to from persons below by using ropes to lift or retrieve supplies, as you can imagine were necessary.



Figure 4 *Simion the Stylite, Elder and Younger, 1699, icon*



Figure 5 Pillar Halos, methode_times_prod_web_bin_7d956a8a-3f08-11eb-83a7-25db7141c256

Another fascinating similarity is between the Cruciform halo and what we call sundog halos. Only God or Christ wear a circular halo with the cross bars within it. That is a distinction carried from the earliest Christian codes of how to represent the Father and Son. Pseudo Dionysius of Areopagite, a first century philosopher and judge of Athens who worked with religious scholars, published a detailed book of rules for how artists were to render the appearance of saints, angels and holy people in art. The color of the clothes worn, the length of the hair, whether a beard was included as well as the

style of the beard were all dictated within the pages of Pseudo Dionysius' book of codes. Also included in the book was the hierarchy of angels. One of us today might think that an angel with a simple circular halo represents the highest form of angels, save for the archangels. Not so! There is a system of three levels of angels with three equal counterparts in each level. Interestingly, not all angels wear halos, just as not all angels wear wings.



Figure 6 Sundog Halo

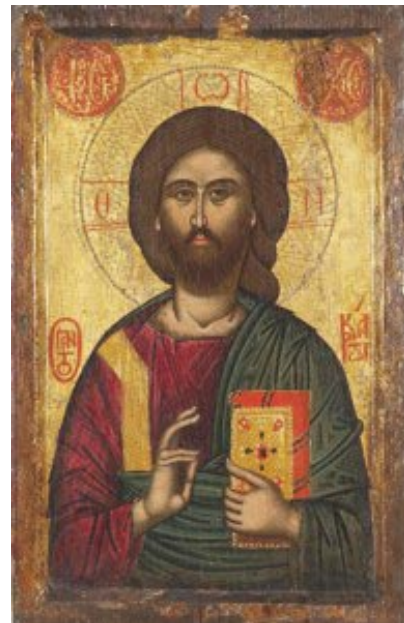


Figure 7 Rogers, Icon

Why was it necessary to strictly distinguish visually the differences between characters of the bible and what type of angel was being portrayed in Medieval or Renaissance art? Because these illustrations that decorated churches and public buildings were representing the bible's dogma for the masses of illiterate followers. Stories of proper behavior, morals, rewards and punishments were broadcast to citizens without the use of the written word. Walk into Christian churches or cathedrals and experience the true meaning of the word awesome. The power within is rivalled only by

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the stars and raging meteorological events on earth. Even a non-believer can feel the intimidating power of art and architecture by standing amongst and below the gothic pillars and scornful faces of lions sculpted into their bases. The wrath and greatness of God is everywhere we travel in religious buildings from centuries ago. It isn't by chance that in most churches the congregation cannot leave the building without passing by a panel with "The Last Judgment" on their way out. Art and architecture proclaimed the acceptable and unacceptable behavior of citizens.

"Art was not expression, but construction, an operation aiming at a certain result." -Umberto Eco



Figure 8 St. Gregory IV, r. 827-44, San Marcos, Rome

The codes of illustrating and explaining bible stories constantly changed during the Medieval years. Hierarchy was adhered to so that a lifestyle was constructed based on the hours of the day, the rhythm of the dance and the stature of importance within the church and community. Christianity was a new faith that had to be integrated into an already built system of power, government and military. Donors of art or money for the building and decoration of churches and public venues were sometimes portrayed with an emblem of divinity. At times a generous donor was commended in art by portraying them with a halo in the shape of a square. This conspicuously identified the person as one who was held in high esteem by the church as well as suggest that s(he) was on their way to acquiring an angelic position after death. This is another clue offered by halos when dating art. The square halo shows that the person wearing it was still alive at the time when the art was created.



Figure 9 Halo design from a pattern book.



Figure 10 Giotto di Bondone, *Allegory of Obedience*, 1320, Assisi

Another order of angels represented in art were the seven virtues. In Italian art the virtues were portrayed wearing six-sided halos. The Holy Trinity is depicted with God wearing a triangular halo; a distinction reserved for the highest of importance. Mandorla, an Italian word meaning almond-shaped, is a full-body halo usually reserved for the mother Mary, Jesus or God. These codes were adhered to strictly during the earliest Christian art. Eventually we will see artists having more freedom to illustrate stories the way they and/or their patrons wished.



Figure 11 Detail from Matteo di Giovanni's, *Sts. Catherine and Barbara with Mary*, 1479



Figure 12 Baldini, *St. Dominic with Sts. Peter and Paul*, 1460s-1480s

A new system of designating rewards in the afterlife developed before the Renaissance. Anyone who died with one or more of these preconditions received a crown to rest near or on their halo. The three forms of martyrdom that were compensated with a crown were 1) being a virgin at the time of death, 2) being a teacher or in terms of those days, a doctor, who preaches the word of God

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while alive, and 3) having been killed for being a martyr for God. Mother Mary is often shown with a crown and/or a halo and at least one star on her robe.

The added message given by the shape of the halo, as well as the inclusion of personal attributes of the individuals wearing them, offered more information allowing viewers to easily identify the characters being illustrated.

The use of gold gilding flourished in Medieval sacred art and was especially



Figure 13 Barnaba da Modena *Ascension*, 1377 with Mandorla Halo

prominent when depicting halos. Such a premium, malleable, colorful and shiny medium was perfect at depicting divine light. Light itself is often associated with wisdom, revealing the path, waking up and pointing to something that otherwise may not be so obvious to common humans. Just like the planetary acrobats seen in the sky, the light(s) show the way. Our primal teachers were from above and they taught us about cycles and motion, changes in the tides and irrigation, and the effects of light upon our crops. It's

easy to point out that many religions were preceded with symbols of the cosmos by ancient civilizations.



Figure 14 Andrea Orcagna, *Detail from Strozzi Altarpiece*, 1354-57.

Imagine being in a dark church lit only with candles and notice how the light flickers off the gold surface, especially gold that has been punched, raised or embossed. The sparkling texture adds to the sacred imagery. In early sacred art gold was the most important ingredient only surpassed in cost and usage by the beautiful and rare lapis lazuli. The use of pounding tools has been studied in recent years helping us to identify the artists of works in art. Each workshop (*bottega*) used unique forms on tools to

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embellish halos. In some cases we can see that workshops worked together on a piece by witnessing their distinctive tool patterns.

Between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, the shapes and styles of halos noticeably evolved. They grew from simple, round circles into elaborately decorated crowns, lavished with finishing touches. These changes were caused by several shifts in social, economic, religious, and artistic adjustments. Much is due to the prodigious amount of philosophical growth and humanity's new self-awareness during these years that



Figure 15 Giusto de Menabuoi, *The Creation*, 1375-76, Padua

piqued scholars and religious leaders to try to explain the meaning of life. Especially important to the Renaissance mind was how did religion fit into the new ideas about existentialism? Indeed, how did religion and self-actualism co-exist with astrology? Within the Medieval and Renaissance years astrological art cohabited with Christian art in many well-known sacred works; some of these included halos.

During the Renaissance, gold became unfashionable and conspicuous which affected the appearance of halos. With the awareness or enlightenment of astronomy and the self-determination of astrology, natural perspectives became dominant in Renaissance art. Prescribing to proper perspective became more important than the

inclusion of an icon. In Leonardo da Vinci's opinion, art was a science. We see halos diminish in size and complexity and become less conspicuous. They became old-fashioned.

"The circle is a link with the cosmic." - Vassily Kandinski

Halos were still present during the 1760s when a book was written by Dionysius of Fourna titled, *The Painter's Manual*. This book went beyond the original book of religious symbology that had been written centuries earlier by Pseudo Dionysius of Arapagite. Pages of symbols are listed within it in painstakingly indexed tables listing saints and each of their attributes, their clothing, everything. This book advises that

The seventy apostles. (3)

James the Brother of God, an old man with a long beard. October 23rd.

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Matthias, an old man with a rounded beard.

Cleopas, an old man with a pointed beard.

Andronicus, a young man, beardless by nature.

Silvanus, an old man, bald, with a short beard.

Agabus, an old man with a beard divided into two points.

Ananias, an old man with a long beard.

Philip, a young man with an incipient beard. October 11th.

Prochorus, a grey-haired man with a short beard divided into two points.

Nicanor, a young man with an incipient beard.

James Alphaeus, a young man with a pointed beard; one of the 12.

356(316)

Judas the brother of the Lord, a young man with an incipient beard.

Rufus, a grey-haired man with a wide beard.

Sosthenes, an old man, bald, with a long beard.

Linus, a young man with a rounded beard. Stachys, a young man with a pointed beard.

Stephen, a beardless young deacon.

Timon, a grey-haired man with a brown, rush-like beard. (4)

Hermas, a young man with an incipient beard. Phlegon, a young man, beardless.

Sosipatrus, a young man with a rounded beard.

Jason, a young man with an incipient beard.

Gaius, an old man with a long beard. Tychicus, a young man, beardless.

Philemon, an old man with a smoke-like beard.

Narcissus, a young man with an incipient beard.

Trophimus, grey-haired, with a long beard.

Caesar, a young man, beardless.

Zenas, grey-haired, with a rounded beard.

Aristarchus, an old man with curly hair.

Mark, nephew of Barnabas, a young man, beardless.

Silas, a young man with an incipient beard.

Gaius, an old man with a pointed beard.

Hermes, an old man with a long, wide beard.

Asyngcritus, an old man with a beard divided into three points.

Apollos, an old man with a wide beard.

357(317)

Cephas, a young man with an incipient beard.

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artists must use a compass to draw halos. Here is a portion of an excerpt describing the seventy apostles.



Figure 16 Franco dei Russi, *Initial E: David Lifting up His Soul to God*, with triangular halo

Saint Augustine believed that the circle was the most beautiful shape because it lacked any distracting angles that would interfere with the continuous flow of the circumference. The first geocentric solar system was drawn by Heraclides (330 BC) with seven perfectly round heavenly bodies. The Greeks believed that planets traveled in circular paths around our earth. Staring at the full moon our earliest ancestors found a perfect shape to assign divinity and importance to a goddess or a god. Before campfires or lamps there was only the light of celestial bodies rotating in the skies. In our earliest ancestors' environment, the major sources would be our sun or moon. At times even they were seen with a halo encircling them depending on the amount of moisture in the atmosphere. It's not a coincidence that religions worldwide equate divinity with a source of light.

The beautiful, golden rings of radiance, patterns, and strengths have no purpose in art anymore. As a subject, however, halos have been well worth studying. Modern humanity should be grateful that artists included them in artwork that we can enjoy

centuries later. It's important to acknowledge that halos in the religious art of Medieval and Renaissance cultures are originally from the natural world of cosmic phenomena. They are, simply put, a member of our cosmic genetics. Humans have been maturing and learning steadily under the guidance of celestial bodies. The sun, stars, moon and planets have molded our environment as well as our art by being ingredients of our archetypal chemistry and memory.



Figure 17 Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi, *Annunciation with Sts. Ansanus and Margaret*, 1314-17, Florence

Joyce Hoffman, Ph.D. is an artist and art historian. For more in-depth information, references and more illustrations, you can view her dissertation titled “A Closer Look at Halos in Medieval and Renaissance Italian Art” at

<https://www.uniselinus.education/sites/default/files/2022-06/joice%20marie%20hoffman.pdf> (sic)